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Khrushchev Fathered Space Race

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NEW YORK—Sunday's Soviet launching of a rocket to the moon, on the eve of the Apollo 11 flight, is the latest sign of the close relationship between the Soviet and American space programs since the first Sputnik. In fact, if the world were run on a logical basis, one of the seats of honor would be occupied by Nikita S. Khrushchev, former leader of the Soviet Union.

Khrushchev won't be there of course. Yet if he were able to speak openly he could with some justice claim that as much as any other living person he was responsible for setting off the train of events leading to this week's historic adventure.

Youngsters of the present generation have no memories of Khrushchev in his heyday. They recall neither the profound shock Americans felt late in 1957 when the first two Soviet Sputniks were orbited nor the feelings of extreme humiliation that swept this country when the first attempts to orbit the misnamed American Vanguard satellites proved fiascos.

It was Khrushchev—then in the center of the world spotlight as the foremost Soviet leader—who saw the political and propaganda opportunities presented by these events and who moved

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rapidly to take advantage of them.

Day after day he hammered home the theme that Soviet space successes and American space failures proved the superiority of communism over capitalism, as well as the inevitability of communism's world triumph through the process of peaceful economic and technological competition.

The combination of Soviet space achievements and Khrushchev's propaganda had a traumatic impact on this country. For the first time in U. S. history, some American leaders began to fear that there might be a basis in reality for Soviet boasts about the superiority of Moscow's system.

The late Allen W. Dulles, then head of the Central Intelligence Agency, made it his top priority to warn Americans of the reality and seriousness of the Soviet challenge, pleading that this country wake up to the need for better performance in production and technology in order to repulse Moscow's threat.

Then Yuri Gagarin became the first man to orbit the earth and the issue was decided. On May 25, 1961, President John F. Ken-

edy made his historic declaration to Congress: "I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to earth."

There is deep irony in this prehistory of the Apollo project for at least two reasons.

For one thing, the Soviet challenge that Khruschev had brainwashed Americans into fearing proved before long to be an empty threat.

And this country has discovered in the intervening years that its own internal problems—not the Soviet threat—were the most serious challenges to its future.